



If you want people to do what you say you must have qualities of great leadership, but what are they? [Alex Blyth](#)

Leadership remains a nebulous concept. While most people agree that leadership is important, few of them agree on why that is the case.

As the managing director of a recruitment firm for accountancy and finance staff, Steve Carter is often asked to look for leadership qualities. He explains why: 'People leave managers and leaders, not jobs. So, the ability to gain the support of your staff is one of the most important factors in retaining staff. Ultimately if you don't have the support of your employees, you'll

soon find that no-one is following and you're leading nothing.'

For Martin Pollins, founder of Bizezia, an online marketing and management tool provider for the accountancy profession, however, it is about more than just staff retention. He says: 'The single most important element determining whether or not a business will succeed is the ability to make the most of peoples' skills. That's why leadership is so important through setting goals and inspiring action. Those who know how will always be led by those who know why.'

The seven qualities of a great business leader

Whatever it is that makes leadership important, research from HR consultancy Hewitt Associates suggests that it really can have an impact on the bottom line. It looked at over 600 companies worldwide and discovered a very clear link between leadership development and financial success. Given this, the question of what makes a good leader becomes even more pressing.

We recognise great leaders when we see them. The success of business people such as Walt Disney, Bill Gates, Henry Ford, John Welch, Dame Anita Roddick, Barbara Cassini, Sir Richard Branson, Sir Terry Leahy, Stelios Haji-Ioannou, Philip Green, Charles Dunstone, and Sir Martin Sorrell, has been attributed to their ability to lead others. Yet what is it about them that made them great leaders?

There is, unfortunately, no single answer. However, according to the experts, great leaders tend to have at least one of the following seven characteristics.

1 A genuine passion for improvement

Many of us want to be leaders. However, according to Robert Myatt, managing consultant at HR consultancy Kaisen Consulting, what motivates us to aspire to leadership is a significant factor in determining whether or not we will be successful at it. He says: 'We have profiled over 10,000 business leaders and all of them have natural strengths. The most successful have a genuine desire to motivate and help people fulfil their potential. They are interested in more than just career progression and a hefty pay rise. There is no blueprint for the ideal leader but what all good business leaders have in common is their ability to create a state of optimism, teamwork, engagement, innovation and high performance in their people.'

2 Congruence

Think of the great leaders you have known. You will probably find that you trusted all of them, but that you find it hard to explain why. Margi Gordon, principal consultant at think-tank Roffey Park, thinks she has an answer. She says: 'More than anything leaders in business are congruent individuals. They make sure that what they say and do is consistent with who they are and their fundamental beliefs and values. They build trust by their honesty and authenticity. They inspire others with their vision for the future.'

3 Flexibility

Wendy Lord is chief psychologist at Hogrefe, a consultancy that publishes the Leadership Judgment Indicator. For her, successful leadership is about being able to know which leadership style is most appropriate to the circumstances. She explains: 'The trap that most people fall into is to use a 'one-track' approach to leading others. They feel comfortable with one particular leadership style and so they rely on that almost exclusively. The simple fact is that while all styles will work in some situations, no single style of leadership is effective in all circumstances.'

4 Provide clarity and purpose

Although flexibility of approach is important, leaders must also provide a consistent message to those they are leading. Joe Goasdue, chief executive of the British Quality Foundation, says: 'Excellent leaders establish clarity of purpose and direction within the organisation, a clear identity for the organisation, a shared set of values and ethics, and consistent behaviours throughout the organisation. During times of turbulence they display a constancy of purpose and steadiness that inspires the confidence and commitment of their stakeholders.'

5 People skills

Julia Lea, European development councillor of Junior Council International, a leadership development organisation, highlights the importance of working well with people. She says: 'Smart business leaders know that running a company is not a one-man show. It takes a team of committed and capable employees to get the job done. So, they surround themselves with the best people and communicate effectively with them. A good business leader should be able to demonstrate fair treatment to all people because prejudice is the enemy of justice. He should display empathy by being sensitive to the feelings, values, interests and well-being of others in his team. Without empathy, you can't build trust. And without trust, you will never be able to get the best effort from your employees. As Dwight Eisenhower put it, 'Leadership is the art of getting someone else to do something you want done because he wants to do it.'

6 Listen and learn

Robin Linnear, a partner at accountancy coaching firm Praesta Partners, believes that what sets great leaders apart is their willingness and ability to listen and learn. He says: 'Leaders have to show genuine humility and authority grown from a grounded strength and presence. They also need to demonstrate that they work in a wider team therefore they learn from everyone. The only person I have ever known to have all these characteristics was the late Sir Christopher Harding who was chair at United Utilities and BNFL. Within the accountancy profession the one who got very near was Roy Jennings, managing partner in tax at Arthur Andersen.'

7 The X factor

Finally, there is always in a truly great leader, some indefinable quality, that X factor. Jeff Longhurst, chairman of the Factors and Discounters Association, describes this as an emotional attachment to the people the leader is leading. He says: 'Some would say that Gordon Brown has the general qualities required to lead the country. He is intelligent, knowledgeable and assertive. However, there is still debate over whether he can fill Tony Blair's boots. This is because he lacks a sense of emotional attachment to the people he seeks to lead. Leaders need this real emotional attachment to and from the people they direct. This grows through mutual trust, loyalty and respect.'

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The top 10

Hewitt Associates, a global human resources services firm, has revealed the top 10 European companies for developing leaders. The list was put together by an independent panel of judges, composed of academics and business executives from across Europe. They assessed companies based on development experiences, senior leader interaction, compensation, organisational culture and succession planning processes.

1. UBS (Switzerland)
2. L'Oreal (France)
3. Royal Bank of Scotland (UK)
4. BMW (Germany)
5. Vodafone (UK)
6. Lufthansa (Germany)
7. Randstad Holding (Netherlands)
8. Degussa (Germany)
9. Voith (Germany)
10. ING Group (Netherlands)